

Today's gospel passage gives us what Christians have long called the Lord's "Summary of the Law." It came in response to a religious lawyer's question, a Pharisee's question about Torah – the Jewish religious law. "Teacher," he said, "what is the most important law?" Matthew referred to the question as a "test," the implication being a challenge. There is, in all of the gospels, something of an anti-Jewish theme, and this theme's focus is usually on the Jewish movement, or religious / political group, known as the Pharisees. Knowing this, when I look at the context of this passage, I doubt that the question of what was the greatest of the laws was, in reality, a challenge of Jesus. The Pharisee's, and another group known as the Sadducees, were perpetually at odds with one another and, as Matthew reported, Jesus had just recently, and quite effectively, silenced the Sadducees. So, I think that the Pharisee's, in asking this question, were primarily interested in discovering how Jesus thought, how he would interpret and rank the various points of law and even whether, perhaps, Jesus shared some of their cherished beliefs and hopes.

Jesus responded easily, because to him the answer was obvious and immediate. He might have even said something like, "Well, guys, that's an easy one." In any case, his response was important for the Pharisees to hear and for us to hear today. "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Our Lord's "Summary of the Law" may very well be the most important teachings that the Bible gives us, and it is certainly something that we should "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest." What is our first obligation as members of the family of God? Our first obligation is this: We are to love the Lord our God with our entire being and love others in a self-giving way, too. This is not a new thing. It was not even new with Jesus. The people of Israel were taught this from almost the beginning of their history. The expectation of loving God and neighbor dates back to Moses. There is a prayer that every devout Jew prays, even today, and that Jews have prayed for thousands of years. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind." Another Jewish commandment told the people of Israel to love their neighbor. Jesus simply combined these two, as he responded to the Pharisees. Jesus said, the whole of what God would have you be and do can really be wrapped up in two things. Love God with all your being, and love your neighbor, too. Jesus would say that if we do this, we will have God's approval, for there is really nothing else that God asks. All that God asks of us is summed up in these two commandments. Jesus taught this theme of love throughout his ministry, and never more so than on the night that he was betrayed, the night before he died. At his Last Supper with his disciples, he washed their feet as a symbolic act of love. Jesus the Christ, whom his Father, God, had made Lord of the entire universe, would not use his power and authority to lord it over his friends. He washed their feet and he said this to them. "I am giving you a new commandment. I want you to love others, as I love you. In this way, people will know that you are my disciples."

God asks nothing of us that he does not give to us. If God gives us food for our nourishment, he expects us to not hoard it, but to share it with those who have less. If God blesses us with riches, he wants us to bless others from our bounty, because an unwelcome reality of our world is that wealth is not evenly distributed. The Church calls this idea of sharing stewardship. Stewardship is sharing our blessings, be it our talents, our time or our resources. Stewardship says that all that we have is God's

gift to us. If we love others as Jesus loves us, we share what God has given us with those in need.

But there is more to this concept of love as sharing. What we learn from Jesus is that his love for us was the sharing of self, a giving away of self in the form of sacrifice. Jesus gave his life for us. Through the sacrifice of himself, we find redemption. If this sounds strange, it shouldn't. In human relationships, we know, or should know, that the love that builds a relationship is never self-serving love, and that true love puts the well being of the other first. When you put someone else before yourself, it can be said that you are sacrificing yourself for the good of the other. True love is always sacrificial, because when you truly love someone you invest yourself in him or her and you give of your self to them. The antithesis of that is narcissism, which is simply the love of self. Narcissism steals from the other. Love gives the self to the other. God loves us so much that he gave himself to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Holy Spirit calls us, each day, to this level of loving. The Spirit calls us to put aside self-concern, to put aside hatred. The Spirit calls us to take the challenge that Jesus has given us, to love God as God loves us; to love others as Jesus loves us. When we do this, we are as close to God as we shall ever be. We are at one with the Lord. *Amen.*